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ABSTRACT

This document reports on an investigation that described patterns of interests in specific careers for academically talented seventh grade girls and boys. This study represents a step in addressing the unequal distribution of males and females in many occupational fields, most notably the low involvement of females in scientific and technical fields and mathematics. Interest patterns exhibited by girls and boys may be related to future job choice; therefore, it is important to determine these interests as they tend to become more differentiated during adolescence, a time when students are developing the ability to think in terms of the future. The primary objective of this investigation was to compare the occupational interests of academically talented male and female seventh graders. A sample of 1,272 applicants to the Duke University Talent Identification Program Talent Search served as subjects for this study. Subjects rated 59 occupations in terms of how much they would like or dislike each occupation. Results indicated a gender stereotyped pattern of career interests; males rated quantitative, scientific, and vocational occupations higher than females, while girls rated teaching and the arts higher than boys. This pattern of results suggests that, even for this highly talented sample, a gender based scheme of career interest is in place well before high school. Interventions aimed at increasing numbers of females in mathematics and science based careers may need to be implemented earlier than the seventh grade. (Author/DK)

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Career Interests of Academically Talented Seventh Graders

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Abstract

The primary objective of this investigation was to compare the occupational interests of academically talented male and female seventh-graders. A sample of 1272 applicants to the Duke University Talent Identification Program Talent Search served as subjects for this study. Subjects rated 59 occupations in terms of how much they would like or dislike each occupation. Results indicated a gender-stereotyped pattern of career interests; males rated quantitative, scientific, and vocational occupations higher than females, while girls rated teaching and the arts higher than boys. This pattern of results suggests that, even for this highly talented sample, a gender-based scheme of career interest is in place well before high school. Interventions aimed at increasing the numbers of females in math- and science-based careers may need to be implemented earlier than the seventh grade.

Career Interests of Academically Talented Seventh Graders

The academically talented are a special group with specific attributes and concerns. An important area of research concerning this group addresses the development of career interests and choices. Some researchers believe that these processes are especially complex for talented students, because these students tend to have a wide range of interests and abilities that does not lend itself to a clear occupational path. This "multipotentiality" (see Kerr & Ghrist-Priebe, 1988) creates the need for specific career counseling techniques that emphasize needs and values and provide more structure than open exploration (Colangelo & Zaffrann, 1979; Kerr & Ghrist-Priebe, 1988). Understanding the patterns of career interest and choice in this group is further complicated by recognizing the implications of gender issues for talented students, especially talented girls (Hollinger, 1988; Kerr, 1988).

This investigation describes patterns of interests in specific careers for academically talented seventh grade girls and boys. This study represents a step in addressing the unequal distribution of males and females in many occupational fields, most notably the low involvement of females in scientific and technical fields and mathematics. Interest patterns exhibited by girls and boys may be related to future job choice; therefore, it is important to determine these interests as they tend to become more differentiated during adolescence (e.g., Jepsen, 1984), a time when students are developing the ability to think in terms of the future.

Method

Subjects

Subjects were drawn from the Duke University Talent Identification Program Talent Search. Through this Talent Search, which covers a 16-state region in the southeastern and midwestern United States, seventh graders identified as scoring at

or above the 97th percentile on a standard in-school achievement test are contacted through their schools and invited to take the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) or American College Test (ACT); generally 80 percent of these Talent Search applicants do take one of these tests during seventh grade. Scores on these tests determine eligibility for the Summer Residential Program (SRP), a three-week scholastic program held on the Duke University campus. Approximately six percent of the students taking either test subsequently qualify for the SRP. TIP provides all Talent Search applicants with a variety of publications (e.g., newsletters, magazines) and informative materials (e.g., listings of special educational programs) for four years, regardless of whether or not a given student takes the SAT or ACT or what score a student received on one of these tests.

Three-thousand of the approximately 57,000 1991 Talent Search applicants were selected to take part in the Talent Search Questionnaire project. Subjects were solicited from each of the sixteen Talent Search states (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Missouri, Mississippi, North Carolina, Nebraska, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas). We randomly sampled one thousand each White boys and White girls and five hundred each non-White boys and girls. Of these three thousand, 1272 (42.4%) participated by returning completed questionnaires. Respondents were representative of the mail-out sample in terms of sex, race, and state of residence (Stocking, Oppler, Porter, & Goldstein, 1992).

Instrumentation

One of the primary methods of data collection through the 13-year history of the Talent Identification Program has been the Talent Search Questionnaire (TSQ), which has taken a variety of forms over the years. The TSQ was revised in 1990 after study of former Talent Search Questionnaires and instruments used by Project

TALENT and the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS). The revised TSQ was used as a pilot for a future longitudinal study to be conducted by TIP in collaboration with the American Institutes for Research (AIR). The current TSQ is comprised of two separate questionnaires, one for students and one for parents. Each household received both questionnaires. The current investigation involves only the Student Questionnaire.

The Student Questionnaire is composed of 240 items and is accompanied by a computer-readable answer sheet. One section of the TSQ concerns how much students think they would like or dislike each of 59 occupations. Occupations were chosen to represent a variety of fields and, in particular, to solicit information on math- and science-related occupations.

Students rated each occupation according to the following scale: (a) I would like this occupation very much, (b) I would like this occupation a little, (c) I have no opinion or do not know much about this occupation, (d) I would dislike this occupation a little, and (e) I would dislike this occupation very much. Students were asked to rate each occupation only by how much they would like or dislike each according to the specific activity that occupation involves, regardless of salary or status. Students were told that if they indicated they would like an occupation that they were not necessarily stating an intention to pursue that occupation.

Procedure

Packets of questionnaires were mailed out in early February. The majority of those students completing the Questionnaire returned them by mid-March. This project was conducted independently of other TIP procedures, such as other mailings, and students were assured in the cover letter and in the TSQ itself that completion of the TSQ had no relation to their decision of whether or not to take the SAT or ACT, or to their subsequent potential selection for TIP.

Analysis and Results

The primary objective of this investigation was to compare the occupational interests of academically talented male and female seventh-graders. As a first step in making these comparisons, we conducted a two-way repeated measures analysis of variance, with one between-subjects factor (sex of the respondent) and one within-subjects factor (occupation). There were 59 different occupations for which respondents were asked to express their interest, and therefore 59 levels of comparison for the within-subjects factor. Because the repeated measures analysis required respondents with complete data (i.e., responses for all 59 occupations), the sample size was reduced to 1067 (521 boys and 546 girls). The results indicated that the main effect for occupation was significant ($F(58,1008)=254.79$, $p<.0001$), as was the interaction between occupation and sex of the respondent ($F(58,1008)=30.78$, $p<.0001$). However, the main effect for sex was not significant ($F(1,1065)=2.27$, n.s.). The interaction between sex of respondent and occupation signifies that the mean responses of boys and girls differed significantly for one or more of the occupations included in the questionnaire.

Given the significant findings of the multivariate analysis, we conducted a series of t-tests comparing the occupational interests of boys and girls in all 59 occupations. The results of these comparisons are reported in Table 1. This table shows the means and standard deviations of boys' and girls' responses for each of the 59 occupations, as well as the t-value and effect size (d) for each comparison. (Effect sizes were computed by subtracting the mean of the girls' responses from the mean of the boys' responses and dividing the difference by the pooled standard deviation. Thus, a positive effect size for a given occupation indicates that the interest expressed by boys in that occupation was greater than that expressed by girls.) Because respondents were not required to have complete data across all 59

occupations to be included in these comparisons, the numbers of boys and girls indicated in Table 1 are greater than those reported for the repeated measures analysis.

Insert Table 1 about here

The t-test results indicate that there were significant differences between the mean responses of boys and girls for 51 of the 59 comparisons. This is not surprising considering the sample sizes associated with these comparisons. More noteworthy, perhaps, is the pattern of the observed differences. Table 2 summarizes this pattern in a list of occupations rated significantly higher by boys and by girls, respectively. Specifically, the 26 occupations for which boys expressed significantly greater interest (or less disinterest) than girls consisted primarily of occupations in traditionally male-dominated fields, such as mathematics and the sciences (e.g., Chemist [d=.39]; Computer Programmer [d=.40]; Engineer [d=.66]; Physicist [d=.24]), technical vocations (e.g., Auto Mechanic [d=.60]; Electrician [d=.78];), athletics (e.g., Athletic Coach [d=.32]; Professional Athlete [d=.48]), and the military (e.g., Air Force Officer [d=.47]; Navy Officer [d=.48]). Alternatively, of the 25 occupations for which girls expressed significantly greater interest than boys, most were in the fields of teaching (e.g., Elementary School Teacher [d=-.53]; English Teacher [d=-.43]); counseling and social services (e.g., Guidance Counselor [d=-.51]; Social Worker [d=-.39]); and the arts (Actor/Actress [d=-.43]; Interior Decorator [d=-1.05]).

Insert Table 2 about here

Finally, in addition to comparing boys' and girls' absolute level of interest in each of the 59 occupations, we also examined their relative interests in these occupations. Table 3 lists the 15 occupations rated the highest by boys and girls, respectively, and Table 4 reports the 15 occupations rated the lowest. Table 3 indicates that five occupations (President of a Large Company, Medical Doctor, Lawyer, Research Scientist, and Actor/Actress) appear among the highest 15 for both boys and girls. The remainder of the highest 15 for boys include seven quantitative and scientific occupations (Engineer, Computer Programmer, Chemist, Architect, Mathematician, Biologist, and Surgeon), plus Professional Athlete, Athletic Coach, Airline Pilot. In contrast, the remainder of the highest 15 for girls include six artistic occupations (Interior Decorator, Dancer, Musician, Writer, Artist, and Art/Music Teacher), as well as Veterinarian, Elementary School Teacher, Psychologist, and Judge.

Insert Tables 3 and 4 about here

At the other end of the spectrum, Table 4 indicates that five occupations (Nursing Home Operator, Farmer, Auto Mechanic, Social Studies Teacher, and Insurance Agent) are among the 15 rated the lowest by both boys and girls. The other occupations in the boys' list include three of the occupations appearing among the girls' highest rated occupations (Dancer, Elementary School Teacher, and Interior Decorator), plus Daycare Center Operator, Nurse, English Teacher, Homemaker, Foreign Language Teacher, Guidance Counselor, and Social Worker. Only the occupation of Engineer appears among both the lowest 15 occupations for girls and the highest 15 occupations for boys. The remainder of the 15 lowest rated

occupations for girls includes Carpenter, Electrician, Officer positions in the four branches of the Armed Services, Sales Representative, Politician, and Dentist.

Discussion

These results indicate that even this highly talented sample demonstrated significant gender differences in occupational interests consistent with a sex-stereotyped model of career interest. Although it is encouraging that Medical Doctor, part of a traditionally male-dominated field, was rated equally attractive by boys and girls, this is one of the few areas that did not reflect a gender difference. More specifically, males rated quantitative, scientific, and vocational occupations higher than females, while girls rated teaching and the arts higher than boys. These findings indicate that gender differences in occupational choices may be attributable to factors occuring earlier than the seventh grade, implying that interventions aimed at steering girls into math and science occupations (for example) may need to be implemented at an earlier point in time.

Further examination of these data may consider career interest in terms of the status (e.g., prestige and/or earning potential) associated with each occupation. It would be valuable to determine if the gender-based interest patterns noted above are indicated if occupations are categorized according to some scheme of status rating. This type of analysis hints at a value structure underlying career interest; some researchers have suggested that gifted high school girls and boys hold similar value patterns (Colangelo & Parker, 1981).

It is a well known fact that the numbers of females currently working in or entering highly technical fields such as mathematics or the sciences are small. The reasons underlying this phenomenon, however, are unclear. The present research effort represents a first step in trying to understand this issue. The interest levels of talented seventh graders, both boys and girls, were examined for a wide range of

occupations. From these analyses we derive that gender-based career preferences are already in place, even for this highly talented sample, by early adolescence, even before high school. From here, we need to learn how the interest patterns of this group relate to the training and education they undertake in the future and in their ultimate career choices. If the patterns currently displayed predict later career choice, it is clear that efforts must be made to (a) identify the root of these gender distinctions, and (b) determine interventions that will allow students access to information, training, or experience with careers they may not have found initially "interesting" to diversify career choice along gender lines.

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Author Notes

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Table 1

Mean Rating of Occupations as a Function of Sex

	Girls		Boys		t	d[a]
	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)		
Accountant	642	-.15(1.38)	607	-1.1(1.31)	-0.64	0.03
Actor/Actress	643	1.01(1.23)	605	.20(1.44)	10.39**	-0.43
Air Force Officer	641	-.95(1.27)	609	-.07(1.47)	-11.35**	0.47
Airline Pilot	634	-.43(1.38)	602	.21(1.37)	-8.15**	0.34
Architect	642	.02(1.42)	606	.49(1.33)	-5.89**	0.24
Army Officer	642	-1.12(1.18)	608	-.49(1.36)	-8.77**	0.39
Art/Music Teacher	644	.17(1.49)	603	-.54(1.39)	8.66**	-0.34
Artist	646	.28(1.42)	610	-.09(1.41)	4.70**	-0.18
Athletic Coach	642	-.40(1.46)	609	.25(1.41)	-7.99**	0.32
Auto Mechanic	641	-1.52(.89)	611	-.86(1.18)	-11.16**	0.6
Banker	639	-.15(1.33)	606	-.14(1.28)	-0.24	0.01
Biologist	642	-.10(1.39)	608	.20(1.32)	-3.89**	0.16
Carpenter	642	-1.2(1.07)	607	-.52(1.26)	-10.39**	0.51
Chemist	639	-.18(1.39)	601	.54(1.32)	-9.37**	0.39
College Professor	646	-.09(1.36)	609	-.25(1.27)	2.08**	-0.09
Computer Programmer	638	-.05(1.31)	603	.62(1.30)	-9.05**	0.4
Dancer	645	.42(1.45)	603	-1.09(1.16)	20.16**	-0.86
Day Care Center Operator	640	-.003(1.49)	603	-1.14(1.06)	15.40**	-0.67
Dentist	644	-.61(1.33)	610	-.45(1.32)	-2.19*	0.09
Editor	639	-.03(1.33)	605	-.49(1.19)	6.34**	-0.28

Continued on next page

Table 1

Mean Rating of Occupations as a Function of Sex (cont.)

	Girls		Boys		t	d[a]
	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)		
Electrician	639	-1.19(1.00)	608	-.31(1.27)	-13.71**	0.68
Elementary School Teacher	641	.23(1.52)	604	-.81(1.26)	13.05**	-0.53
Engineer	636	-.50(1.32)	606	.64(1.31)	-15.28**	0.66
English Teacher	641	-.21(1.48)	609	-.98(1.17)	10.16**	-0.43
Farmer	641	-1.24(1.14)	603	-1.02(1.18)	-3.32**	0.16
Foreign Language Teacher	642	-.22(1.39)	604	-.78(1.18)	7.78**	-0.34
Guidance Counselor	643	.09(1.34)	606	-.71(1.16)	11.26**	-0.51
Homemaker	645	-.14(1.45)	607	-.97(1.35)	11.24**	-0.42
Insurance Agent	642	-.67(1.17)	606	-.68(1.14)	0.2	-0.01
Interior Decorator	642	.73(1.25)	610	-.83(1.18)	22.61**	-1.05
Judge	642	.22(1.45)	601	-.03(1.39)	3.05**	-0.12
Lab Technician	639	-.38(1.29)	601	.19(1.31)	-7.72**	0.34
Lawyer	645	.88(1.31)	610	.51(1.38)	4.83**	-0.2
Marine Corps Officer	642	-1.07(1.23)	608	-.44(132)	-9.09**	0.39
Math Teacher	643	-.02(1.51)	604	-.35(1.42)	3.93**	-0.15
Mathematician	643	-.05(1.50)	610	.24(1.45)	-3.56**	0.14
Medical Doctor	646	.54(1.49)	610	.55(1.43)	-0.14	0.006
Musician	640	.39(1.4)	607	.02(1.45)	4.63**	-0.18

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Table 1

Mean Rating of Occupations as a Function of Sex (cont.)

	Girls		Boys		t	d[a]
	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)		
Navy Officer	646	-1.04(1.15)	608	-.28(1.35)	-10.60**	0.48
Newpaper Reporter	639	.09(1.43)	601	-.34(1.31)	5.59**	-0.23
Nurse	643	.003(1.41)	603	-1.0(1.08)	13.99**	-0.63
Nursing Home Operator	637	-.87(1.18)	603	-1.24(.991)	5.93**	-0.31
Physical Education Teacher	636	-.44(1.49)	603	-.18(1.43)	-3.15**	0.12
Physicist	641	-.24(1.25)	606	.16(1.34)	-5.45**	0.24
Politician	644	-.68(1.34)	609	-.59(1.37)	-1.25	0.05
President of a large Company	643	.82(1.33)	609	1.03(1.23)	-2.89**	0.13
Professional Athlete	646	-.16(1.54)	609	.86(1.37)	-12.30**	0.48
Psychologist	641	.22(1.39)	610	-.31(1.31)	6.85**	-0.29
Real Estate Agent	640	-.37(1.35)	602	-.46(1.25)	1.21	-0.05
Research Scientist	645	.17(1.42)	610	.50(1.31)	-4.16**	0.17
Sales Representative	637	-.79(1.16)	604	-.62(1.20)	-2.49*	0.12
Science Teacher	643	-.18(1.47)	608	-.24(1.39)	0.84	-0.03
Social Studies Teacher	640	-.50(1.35)	609	-.74(1.27)	3.27**	-0.14
Social Worker	644	-.12(1.30)	609	-.69(1.11)	8.28**	-0.39
Statistician	639	-.44(.963)	609	-.34(1.07)	-1.84	0.1
Stockbroker	642	-.42(1.28)	604	-.08(1.29)	-4.78**	0.21

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Table 1

Mean Rating of Occupations as a Function of Sex (cont.)

	Girls		Boys		t	d[a]
	N	Mean (SD)	N	Mean (SD)		
Surgeon	645	-.22(1.53)	610	.19(1.44)	-4.93**	0.19
Veterinarian	643	.46(1.42)	609	.10(1.33)	4.68**	-0.19
Writer	642	.36(1.45)	604	-.22(1.41)	7.12**	-0.28

Note: Mean liking scores coded on the following scale: -2 = I dislike this occupation very much, -1 = I dislike this occupation a little, 0 = I have no opinion or do not know much about this occupation , 1 = I like this occupation a little, and 2 = I like this occupation very much.

[a]Effect sizes (d) were computed by subtracting the mean of the girls' responses from the mean of the boys' responses and dividing the difference by the pooled standard deviation.

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$.

Table 2

Occupations Rated Significantly Differently by Boys and Girls

Occupations rated higher by boys	Occupations rated higher by girls
Air Force officer	Actor/actress
Airline pilot	Art/music teacher
Architects	Artist
Army officer	College professor
Athletic coach	Dancer
Auto mechanic	Daycare center operator
Biologist	Editor
Carpenter	Elementary school teacher
Chemist	English teacher
Computer programmer	Foreign language teacher
Dentist	Guidance counselor
Electrician	Homemaker
Engineer	Interior decorator
Farmer	Judge
Laboratory technician	Lawyer
Marine Corps Officer	Math teacher
Mathematician	Musician
Navy officer	Newspaper reporter
Physical Education teacher	Nurse
Physicist	Psychologist
President of large company	Social Studies teacher
Professional athlete	Social worker
Research scientist	Veterinarian
Sales representative	Writer
Stockbroker	
Surgeon	

Table 3

Ranking and Means of 15 Highest Rated Occupations as a Function of Sex

Rank[a]	Girls (mean)	Boys (mean)
1	Actor/actress (1.00)	President of a large company (1.03)
2	Lawyer (0.88)	Professional athlete (0.86)
3	President of a large company (0.82)	Engineer (0.64)
4	Interior decorator (0.73)	Computer programmer (0.62)
5	Medical doctor (0.54)	Medical doctor (0.55)
6	Veterinarian (0.46)	Chemist (0.54)
7	Dancer (0.42)	Lawyer (0.51)
8	Musician (0.39)	Research scientist (0.50)
9	Writer (0.36)	Architect (0.49)
10	Artist (0.28)	Athletic coach (0.25)
11	Elementary school teacher (0.23)	Mathematician (0.24)
12	Psychologist (0.22)	Airline pilot (0.21)
13	Judge (0.22)	Actor/actress (0.20)
14	Research scientist (0.17)	Biologist (0.20)
15	Art/Music teacher (0.17)	Surgeon (0.19)

Note: Mean liking scores based on the following scale: -2 = I would dislike this occupation very much, -1 = I would dislike this occupation a little, 0 = I have no opinion or do not know much about this occupation, 1 = I would like this occupation a little, and 2 = I would like this occupation very much.

[a]A ranking of 1 indicates the highest rating of the 15 highest rated occupations; a ranking of 15 indicates the lowest rated of the 15 highest rated occupations

Table 4

Ranking and Means of 15 Lowest Rated Occupations as a Function of Sex

Rank[a]	Girls (mean)	Boys (mean)
1	Auto mechanic (-1.52)	Nursing home operator (-1.24)
2	Farmer (-1.24)	Daycare center operator (-1.14)
3	Carpenter (-1.20)	Dancer (-1.09)
4	Electrician (-1.19)	Farmer (-1.03)
5	Army officer (-1.12)	Nurse (-1.00)
6	Marine Corps officer (-1.07)	English teacher (-0.98)
7	Navy officer (-1.04)	Homemaker (-0.97)
8	Air Force officer (-0.95)	Auto mechanic (-0.86)
9	Nursing home operator (-0.87)	Interior decorator (-0.83)
10	Sales representative (-0.79)	Elementary school teacher (-0.81)
11	Politician (-0.68)	Foreign language teacher (-0.78)
12	Insurance agent (-0.67)	Social studies teacher (-0.74)
13	Dentist (-0.61)	Guidance counselor (-0.71)
14	Engineer (-0.50)	Social worker (-0.69)
15	Social Studies teacher (-0.50)	Insurance agent (-0.68)

Note: Mean liking scores based on the following scale: -2 = I would dislike this occupation very much, -1 = I would dislike this occupation a little, 0 = I have no opinion or do not know much about this occupation, 1 = I would like this occupation a little, and 2 = I would like this occupation very much.

[a]A ranking of 1 indicates the highest rating of the 15 highest rated occupations; a ranking of 15 indicates the lowest rated of the 15 highest rated occupations.